

# Volumes of Silence

An Anno Amagium Short Story by Hank Whitson

It was approaching late Libra, and the Archives were still reeling from the incursion that happened a month earlier, during the quarterly cleaning. There was no evidence of the fire that had ravaged the heart of the collection. Most of the items that had migrated to escape the blaze had been restored to their proper shelves, and the definitive losses had been catalogued. There was also no trace of the festering Ratkings who had killed four Archivists and two Keepers. Their blood was scrubbed from the warded, stone floor like nothing had happened.

*But any Archivist can hear the strain in the silence.*

Thonis Stroud looked over his shoulder for the noise that wasn't there.

Libraries were home to many sorts of quietude. The forced concentration of scholars. The excitement of an intriguing discovery or compelling read, too breathless for speech. Or, in the Archives' case, the sudden, hungry patience of a predator. The trouble with the fugue of grief, however, was that it was pronounced enough to obscure all other sorts of silence.

Thonis paused in the southern wing of the temporal grimoire collection, near where he saw Wright for the last time. It was hard to tell if it was exactly the same spot, but for a moment, Thonis thought he could feel the man's presence. *It could happen again. To me, next time. To any of us, or all of us. We toe the line of cataclysm every day.*

He smiled ruefully and snapped his fingers for the ambulator cart to keep up with him.

*What can we do, other than keep walking?*

Five minutes later, Thonis emerged from the shelves, scaling the stairs to the eastern reference desk, where his fellows worked. It was a comfort to catch sight of other orange robes. Being reminded of Wright's loss had chilled his heart's usual cheer.

"Hey Stroud!" A spritely voice called from behind. "Get a load of this!"

A young Novice Archivist, better suited to guidance and retrieval than research, emerged from an adjacent corridor. He had a dead rodent the size of a mastiff slung over his wiry shoulders. *Dire rat. Moderately severe gigantism. Judging from the extra canines, elongated claws, bone protrusions, and mange, the bio-urdic corruption is also significant.*

"That's quite the trophy, Zic," Stroud said, waiting for the newly minted Archivist to fall into step with him and his cart. The three of them ascended the broad staircase leading to the back of the desk.

In Thonis' absence, Katrinya, a Russian Senior Curator on sabbatical, was supposedly supervising the Junior Receptionists who took requests at the front of the desk. Apparently, she had opted to read an enormous grimoire at the back of the desk instead, and Thonis couldn't fault her—supervising capable people was dull. Qess, another Novice, was also working at the rear side of the desk, organizing books for returns. Zic hefted the malodorous carcass onto the counter and Qess wrinkled their nose in disgust.

"Ugh! Can you not... you know... put that thing *exactly* where I'm working?"

"Impressive though, right? I can see why people thought it was a wererat!" Zic said.

*You haven't met a wererat yet, have you, Zic?* Thonis, Katrinya, and Qess exchanged a grin, and smirked at the novice together. Zic pinkened and grabbed the back of his neck.

“Not that, you know, I’ve seen a wererat. Yet. But it looks like I’d figure it would.”

Thonis and Qess both laughed and Zic turned redder still. Katrina snorted.

“Nyet. Were-rat is bigger by twice. At least. Smarter. Meaner as well.”

“This one was pretty cunning and plenty vicious,” Zic said defensively, and started to regale them with the tale of his hunt. Qess listened with wan amusement and a wry grin.

As two of the youngest members of the Athenaeum’s staff, Qess Caldwell and Zictor Nash spent a great deal of time together, and had become something of a duo with regards to returning go-backs. *And possibly partners in other respects as well.* There was an obvious, flirtatious spark between them that charmed and intrigued Thonis, though he did his best to play the oblivious uncle and stay out of their way.

*Surest way to quash a budding relationship is to meddle with it.*

Naturally, the desk phone started ringing as soon as Thonis hefted a towering stack of grimoires from the side of his cart. *I swear he waits until my hands are full before calling.*

“Katrina, put that on speaker, if you’d be so kind,” Thonis called.

Without looking up from her book, she hit the flashing red button on the desk phone. Arch Magus and Grand Master Curator Edrear Poe’s perennially stern and high-strung voice spoke up through the speaker:

“Stroud. The Arcanists have finished with their selections from the restricted section. The volumes are all volatile, so I need you to re-shelve them right away. Also, tell Caldwell to take her break.”

Thonis shot Qess an apologetic glance as he lowered the books onto the desk, and leaned into the receiver.

“*Their* break, sir. I shall tell Qess to take *their* break.”

Before Poe could reply, Thonis killed the call.

“I’m sorry, Qess,” Thonis said.

They snickered and shrugged.

“I mean, I started out with ‘he-him’ so I guess this is a step in the right direction?”

Thonis hoped Poe was not misgendering Qess intentionally, but it was hard to tell. Their boss was far from warm, considerate, or progressive; a tangled knot of stress and academic tunnel vision who could only express himself via rambling theses. He was also fast-approaching seventy. *No. No excuses.* Thonis shook his head and grumbled:

“If the tiny old bastard can recite divinatory collation contracts from memory, he can keep your pronouns straight,” Thonis said.

“I barely can speak this fucking language, and even I do better,” Katrina grunted.

“I’ll protest to the regulatory board if he does it again,” Thonis said.

Qess emanated thanks but gestured for them to drop it.

“I appreciate the sentiment, but you know the board will be more sympathetic to Poe than they would be to me. He’d just go on his best behavior for a few days and hate me all the more for it.”

Zic nodded and added:

“I’d say it was a different time, but gendered magic is *still* a huge part of the Athenaeum’s curriculum. Especially fucking ritualists. Hidebound pricks can’t find their way around a spell without consulting some dead goddess’s menstrual cycle.”

Qess smirked.

“There’s a reason I came out after I finished matriculating. Anyway. I’m off!”

“I should get those tomes back to the restricted section. I’ll leave the desk to you again, Katrinya. Zic, after you dispose of that horrible thing, can you man the lookout? It seems the watch tower is empty.”

Each of the four reference desks at the Archive’s cardinal points had a watch tower that surveyed the labyrinth of books on the bottom floor, so Archivists could track the ever-changing layout of the collection and spot signal glamours from fellows in danger.

“Stiles was supposed to watch,” Katrinya muttered. “Went to ‘inspect something.’ Lost forever, I hope.”

Thonis snickered. Tatham Stiles was useless. His parents forced him through the Athenaeum by paying ever-escalating tuition as his academic performance grew proportionally worse. Then, through various political machinations Thonis would never fathom, they managed to secure him a position in the Archives upon graduation, even though he had required three extra years of study.

Thonis tried not to carry a grudge. The man wasn’t evil, or even intentionally indolent. Just unreliable... and lacking any semblance of initiative. *He probably had as little choice in the matter as the rest of us. Nepotism’s always poison, but in this line of work, it can be lethal.*

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After returning the magical tomes to the restricted spire at the heart of the Archives, Thonis set about a personal quest he had undertaken a day earlier.

Questing was not an unusual state of affairs for an Archivist of the Amagium, or even mundane librarians, if such contradictory creatures existed. Every day, they waged war against the forces of entropy, laziness, and ignorance. And this battle would be won with a book, as battles so often were.

A seventh-year aspirant named Menette had requested Frassell Lambert’s *Meditations on Urdoacoustics*. Menette was his favorite kind of visitor. She didn’t need the text for any specific assignment, though God knew she probably had a crushing course-load. Rather, she was simply hoping to satisfy her curiosity about the way people spoke with their wyrds. *And what endeavor could be nobler for a young scholar of magic?*

Thonis scaled the stairs to the uppermost western landing where the scholarly texts on sensory magic were held—provided they hadn’t wandered off somewhere. He paused at a lookout point to stretch his back. The compressed staircases only had about seven and a half feet of clearance, and Thonis was seven-foot-two, so he subconsciously hunched as he climbed.

Looking over the railing of the small platform, he could glimpse the bottom floor of the collection nearly four stories below him. The collection was one of only twenty such Archives, and they were the densest concentrations of magical objects and knowledge on the planet. The air was rich with atomized paper, aging leather, and magic. Most people, even amagia, found the atmosphere stifling. The mix of physical silence and the collection’s constant magical susurrus was heady and disorienting.

People were wise to be wary. The place was more maze than library, and mortal danger stalked the stacks on a daily basis. Archivists and Keepers, the Amagium’s feared law officers,

took the same combat training courses. There was also fierce debate over who saw more action.

*And yet, the outside world seems so anemic by comparison. So much empty noise and animation, so little actual change.* When Thonis worked, he was in a constant conversation with the collection. He realized that at least part of the dialogue was in his head—either a romantic eccentricity, or the beginnings of insanity. But the place had definite patterns with meaningful cadence and personality. *You have a voice, even if I am part of it.*

Thonis paused to wipe his glasses, then squinted at shelves below. *Seems like the conjuring section has shifted again.* He grinned to himself and pulled out the small, enchanted slate that Archivists used to map and remap the library as it reconfigured itself. He dragged his finger along its surface, charting a rough path back to the western reference deck where he had started, then slid the tablet back into his satchel and resumed his climb.

The body waited at the mouth of the sensory magic section. A young man lying face down on the wooden floor, wrapped in the wilted, light blue robes of an aspiring amagia. Tenth year or thereabouts, by the look of him. Thonis stopped mid-step, off-hand instinctively reaching for one of the two daggers he kept sheathed against the small of his back. Grim surprises were common enough in the collection for Archivists to learn a skeptical sort of caution. Men who jumped at every shadow made easy prey for monsters.

“Study yourself to sleep?” Thonis said loudly, addressing the body.

The boy did even not twitch. Thonis exhaled, extending his wyrd out in every direction, feeling out the rich energy of the library for any potential threats. The books were strangely quiet, however. Their inherences hummed with power, but the volumes made no calls for readership. They issued no greetings or complaints. Rather, the ambient power was tense, like a creature holding its breath as a predator passed by its nest.

*What did I miss, old friend?* There was a beat before he could hear the collection’s answer. Then the deep, feminine voice of the collection slid through his mind: ***What indeed?***

As Thonis’ wyrd touched the aspirant’s body, he could tell that the boy was alive, but deeply unconscious, or sedated. Thonis slowly released the grip of his dagger and reached for a small wand on his thigh. He raised the ornate wooden rod just to the left of his face, and channeled energy into its shaft, commanding it to reflect light. A circular mirror made of ambient moisture, shiny dust, and Thonis’ own wyrd blossomed at the tip of the wand, allowing him to look over his shoulder without completely losing sight of the corridor before him.

Magical creatures—especially fae and egregores—adored misdirection. Simply looking over one’s shoulder provided them with all the opening they needed to appear out of nowhere and assault unwary amagia.

He walked forward at an even pace and knelt to the body. Taking a final look around, Thonis tucked his optics wand back into its elastic holster and gently shook the boy’s shoulder. There was no blood, or obvious sign of injury, which was encouraging, and his breathing was perfectly even, which was even better.

“Come now, friend. Hardly the most comfortable place for a nap.”

No response. Again, Thonis extended his wyrd to the boy’s body, funneling energy into him. When a gentle stream of energy did nothing, Thonis poked him with a sharp urdic greeting that would make anybody jump. But the boy remained prone. Carefully cradling his neck, Thonis rolled him over and started at the sight of the boy’s open eyes.

His pupils were shivering in their sockets, jerking from side to side, then up and back down as if they were reading something at an incredible pace. But the tiny muscles around his eyes, anything that would provide a trace of human emotion or expression, were still.

*Oh dear.*

The boy's eyes were bloodshot and his face was tracked with tears. Then his lids slowly closed, synchronized with unnatural, mechanical perfection. And when they reopened, his eyes were still quivering to the point of blurring his blue irises.

*No. No, that's not good at all.*

Thonis reached to his other thigh and grabbed his sympathy phone. He dialed the internal code for the Archives' PA and waited for the tone before tapping in another code. A second later, speakers and emanators placed throughout the collection spoke up with a pleasant-yet-officious voice:

"Attention visitors: The Arroyo Archives are now closed for an urgent investigation. Please collect all of your belongings, leave all items from the collection as they are, and calmly make your way to an exit. If you need to check out an item, you shall have to return at a later time. Once more..."

Thonis sighed and inspected the boy's immediate surroundings for the source of his trance. The fallen volumes seemed to be inoffensive things. Historical, hidebound approaches to various sensory-enhancing or synesthetic magic.

But one book was different.

One book was wrong.

It gave off no magical energy whatsoever. Surrounded by the other volumes, whose power, and the ambient energy of the place, had mingled and matured over years of use, it seemed like a sucking wound in reality. But this book's Inherence, its ability to maintain magical energy, was completely null. Thonis got a chill just looking at it.

*Xenomancy?* Thonis inquired.

The Archives answered, curt and abrupt: ***It does not belong here.***

Thonis had read about alien magic at length—silent spellcraft that did not produce urdic emanations. Attempting such magic was the Amagium's first and gravest prohibition. Many scholars—*Dickens, Lewis, Barrie*—argued the phenomena was not even magic at all, but a sinister distortion that eroded reality's Resting Laws of math and physics, rather than temporarily altering them.

He knelt to the volume, which appeared to be leather bound with crystal plates—not the most common materials, but hardly unusual in the Archives. The plates were inscribed with characters from a language Thonis could not read or even recognize, which was rare. They were like tribal gashes, accented by square bullet-points and perfectly straight lines. Thonis put on a pair of deadmitts; spun from plastic fibers and other magically inert materials. Lifting the book, the magic-less thing felt heavier than it appeared, like it was an animal lying limp, or a corpse.

He flipped open the back cover to look at the catalogue card.

*And this isn't right either.*

To begin with, the language wasn't written in English, or the same strange script on the cover. But the layout of the card was the same, and the strange letters were serified with the exact same stylings as the font that the Archives used, as if they were extra, forgotten characters from the same alphabet. The catalogue codes were also indecipherable.

Thonis' symphone jerked in his pocket and he answered it.

"Don't leave us in suspense, Stroud. What did you find?" Poe again.

"Downed aspirant at the top of the western sensory landing. He's completely catatonic, save for his eyes. He appears to be in some sort of deep trance."

Poe audibly frowned, and then sighed. Thonis could picture him removing his narrow spectacles and massaging his temples.

"Any idea about the cause?" Poe asked.

"Possibly, but I felt it best to shut things down in case a predatory entity is involved."

"I suppose you aren't wrong. Have a look around the immediate area, and wait for the crowds to clear before you bring the aspirant back to the east desk. We don't need a panic."

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Thonis found nothing else suspicious in the sensory magic landing, and after a few minutes, he placed the errant volume in his satchel and hoisted the aspirant over his shoulder. Thonis thanked God for his hulking frame—most of the other Archivists would have to drag the body back to the desk, or waste an animus on contract magic to bolster their strength.

As he descended the staircase, he saw a glamour flare erupt from the maze of shelves below. It pulsed yellow, then purple, signifying caution, and a downed amagia. Before Thonis could finish his descent, the same two-symbol pattern erupted to the north. And another shown from the east. Dread cinched his lungs like a spiked corset.

***Something slipped by you, Thonis. Something that does not belong here.***

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"Here's the situation, as we grasp it thus far," Poe began, addressing his small army of forty-six Archivists. "We have recovered five catatonic amagia from the collection. One arcanist, two aspirants, and a leximancer. They all appear to be in a deep trance, but there is no obvious cause or connection between them, save for these strange volumes recovered near them."

Poe was diminutive, at least compared to Thonis, standing just over four feet six. He wore a serious expression beneath his circular spectacles and inherently silly black mustache, but his emanations demanded one's full attention and respect.

He walked over to a table and retrieved two of the strange books. They were extremely different from each other. The first was the crystal-plated grimoire Thonis had found, while the other looked like a modern mathematics textbook. Its language was comprised of overlapping, geometric outlines. The front cover featured a picture of a violin with a broken string, and a spider dangling from the end of it.

"These books are urdically silent. Despite the ambient energies of the collection, they lack any form of inherited or innate magic. Which, given their apparent age, is preposterous. As a result, we are to assume this is some form of xenomantic spell."

Scoffs and whispers rippled through the younger members of the crowd, but the older Archivists paled. Poe hushed the room with an emanation.

“We need to retrieve these volumes as quickly as possible and assess what threat they pose and make sure the collection is cleared of all visitors. There’s a lot of ground to cover very quickly, but abnormal danger is about, so we will be working in pairs...”

Thonis probed the atmosphere of the library with his wyrd, and found the same tense silence that had been their all morning, but now tinged with a subtext of dread. Or maybe the dread was there all along, and only laid bare by the bodies.

“Nash. You’re with Stroud. Eastern elemental grimoires.”

Zictor grinned at Stroud and gave him a quick salute. Stroud returned the grin to reassure the boy, but felt no warmth in the gesture. *We are humans foolish enough to live in a lion’s den, and whatever’s here has the lions running scared.*

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Thonis and Zic moved through the stacks slowly, scanning for ‘holes’ in the magical pressure all around them. Again, the atmosphere was tense and muted. Usually, the grimoires would reach out to readers, some whispering promises of power, others reciting their passages in an attempt to entice readers. Today, these emanated voices were reduced to murmurs.

When they were halfway through the hydromancy texts, Zictor called out:

“Found one!”

Before Thonis could urge caution, the young Archivist opened the book. A strange smile came over his face, and he opened his mouth to say something, but the words clotted in his throat. The muscles in his face seemed to misfire in a ripple, and then his expression went completely slack. Zic fell to the floor as if he’d been struck dead.

“Zictor!”

Thonis pulled out his ocular wand and fired a purple flare overhead, then rushed to the body prone on the floor. He rolled the boy over. Sure enough, his eyes quivered feverishly in their sockets, reading some unseen text at a pace beyond human comprehension. Thonis swore and fished his phone out of his pocket and dialed the combination to speak directly through the public address speakers and emanators.

“This is Senior Curator Thonis Stroud: *Do not* attempt to read the volumes!” Thonis tried to sound authoritative, but his own voice struck his ears as frightened. Weak. Insufficient.

“Nash opened one of the books and immediately fell into the trance. Still no expression of magic. I am bringing him back to the east desk now.”

When Thonis hung up his phone, he looked up to find a faun standing idly before him, in the middle of the aisle. Thonis swore and flinched. *It must have appeared while I was distracted. And I didn’t even feel it cross over. Careless.*

It stood on cloven hooves and long legs that, physiologically speaking, shouldn’t be able to properly support its weight despite their impressive musculature. He was clothed only by a pair of graying cotton britches, and a brown leather satchel. Black, corkscrew horns, like those from a gazelle, protruded from its forehead, next to long, erect ears that could have belonged to a donkey or a rabbit. It had a large, rodent-like nose, and gold-green eyes with a goat’s pupils, but otherwise human features. Its fur, the color of polished, petrified redwood bark, was dappled with dashes of white.

*What the devil is it doing here?*

The Amagium strictly forbade fae from entering the Archives. Lesser fae—pixies, gnomes and the like—often ignored this prohibition without serious consequence. But more powerful fae like fauns and elves did not enter on a whim. Technically, Thonis was supposed to slay the faen creatures on sight. But in his experience, you caught more flies with honey than pyromancy, and an amicable conversation generally got them to leave just as easily.

“Salutations. I don’t suppose you know what this is?” Thonis said.

The fae did not answer. It was studying something in its native realm, on the other side of the dimensional Veil, or something in reality that Thonis could not see. His skin goosed. Fae had a singular fascination with humanity. A high-born fae trespassing in reality and disregarding a human—even *if I am a grown adult magus*—was deeply disturbing.

“What brings you to our humble collection?” Thonis tried again.

“There is no humility here,” the faun said. “This menagerie is a monument to hubris.”

Fae were incapable of lying, but the assessment struck Thonis as uncharitable. He pursed his lips and tried again.

“Be that as it may, I’m afraid I must insist on an answer to my question. I would prefer to avoid conflict, but you know well that you shouldn’t be here.”

“Neither should you. Burn this place, Thonis Stroud. Cauterize it before the infection poisons your world.”

Thonis fought another shiver. *If he knows my name, it may mean he’s been watching me through the veil. And fae are not fond of human magic, but even they would see the blasphemy in burning an Archive.*

“What infection?”

“He truly does not know. Always concerned with what should be where, rather than what should not be. The silent volumes have poisoned this place for days, curator.” The faun turned to face Stroud fully for the first time. “An instrument of Erebus stalks these aisles. A Writer,” his tongue wrung the word with distaste, “leaches succor from your collection.”

Thonis pulled out a pen and paper, quickly jotting the fae’s words down in shorthand, mind racing. *Erebus is the stuff of storybooks. The void that encroaches on all worlds. It is theorized to relate to xenomancy... but fae are incapable of lying. Is the faun speaking metaphorically? Or does it truly exist?* Thonis shoved the questions aside.

“Where is this writer? Can we draw it out?”

The faun shook his head.

“It has yet to cross over. Those books are its only connection to your plane so far. The simplest, surest method is to destroy its prospective nest. Burning this hive of secrets will unmoor its connection to this world. Failing that, it can be prematurely summoned and slain. But first it must be suitably Named.”

Thonis grunted. Apart from a single class project, now fourteen years behind him, Thonis had no practical experience with Naming magic. It was the most powerful type of binding a practitioner could perform. Unfortunately, it was paradoxically exacting and numinous. Naming something usually required precisely prepared, time consuming rituals that did not necessarily adhere to common principles of magic.

“How do I learn what Name would be suitable?”

The fae nodded at Zic’s body.



“Sacrifice those who have touched its volumes. Use your most potent auguries in their moment of death. You will glimpse the contours of the Writer’s nature as its prey passes beyond the veil.”

A stern chuckle escaped Thonis’ throat.

“I’m afraid I cannot accept those terms.”

The faun smiled sadly and shrugged.

“Then you are a fool, curator. You must find your own answer and find it quickly, for their time is already short, and once they expire, the Writer will possess the means to Name itself. And I cannot allow that to come to pass.” The faun rubbed its shoulder and tilted its neck to the neck to the side, cracking joints. “You have until its first victim dies. Once that happens, I shall guide a host of Hern’s Wild Hunt to this building, and purge it.”

Thonis’ eyes flashed wide. *That’s no idle bluff. But it’s also a declaration of war.*

“The Amagium would never overlook the destruction of an Archive.”

“Autumn never shies from necessary sacrifice. A lesson you would do well to heed. If you are determined to spare those entombed by the volumes, burn the collection. If you are determined to spare the collection, kill the victims. Or find your own way.” The faun extracted a flute from its pouch. “While you dither, I have preparations to make.”

The faun blew into the flute and its harsh screech made Thonis wince. When his eyes opened, the fae was gone.

“Ah hell,” Thonis sighed.

The trek back to the eastern reference desk was a sobering one. The young man in Thonis’ arms—*still a boy, really*—seemed impossibly fragile, at once soft and brittle. His limbs were still rigid with catatonia, eyes still ceaselessly flashing across an unseen text. And a thought occurred to Thonis.

*What if he absorbed the book’s contents when he cracked the cover? Such things were not unheard of with magical texts. When that transference happens, the mind needs time to process the new knowledge and enters a trance. He is reading the book that now exists inside himself.* Thonis’ stomach knotted with dread. *I have a feeling we have to resolve this before he reaches the last word.*

As Thonis ascended the steps leading to the desk, he felt the sterile thrum of medical magic—diagnostic spells, wards against magical infections and the like. At the summit, he saw a small army of white-robed Medithurges tending the victims. Poe was looking up at the young lead doctor who hunched sheepishly under his glare.

“In short? We have no clue. Apart from the catatonia and eye twitches, there is nothing wrong with them. Normal temperatures, safe urdic respiration, stable pulse. Brain activity is indistinguishable from dreaming.”

“I have another for you,” Thonis said. “Where do you want him?”

“Oh, uh over there. Racheline! Triage.”

When they got Zic situated on a stretcher, the lead Medithurge turned to Thonis.

“You saw it happen, yes? I need to know everything you saw, down to the smallest...”

“I’ll tell you what I saw, but we don’t have time for a lengthy recap. Nor do we have time to continue the search for the other silent volumes.”

Poe stroked his silly little mustache.

“Do tell.”

Another amagia arrived midway through Thonis' recap. Master Arcanist Lewin Carroll was average height with dun brown hair, comfortably settled into his mid-fifties. As a frequent visitor of the Archives, Thonis and the other Archivists knew him well and he was normally a comforting presence, learned and calm. That evening his face was clenched white with tension.

Among his many credentials, he was considered Arroyo's leading authority on xenomantic magic and lore about erebus.

"So that's it? Burn the books or kill our own?" Poe summarized.

"Unless we can find a third path," Thonis said, nodding.

Poe scratched his mustache again then turned to Carroll.

"What do you make of this Master Carroll?"

Carroll took a deep breath and put on a pained face.

"To be entirely honest, we must consider sacrificing these amagia."

"No," Poe said, with the ghost of a chuckle. "No, I'd sooner burn every last book."

Carroll opened his mouth to press his case, but Poe spoke over him. "Master Carroll, I must confess," Poe removed his spectacles to wipe them again, utterly unnecessarily, "Your students extoll your compassion and good council. You are a scholar of peerless renown. I consider you a wise colleague and a good friend." Poe held up his glasses to the light. "But that suggestion is so morally repugnant that I cannot help but wonder whether I got you wrong."

Thonis was surprised twice over. He always assumed Poe had more love for the collection than any living thing, while Carroll always seemed to radiate compassion. Now, the Arcanist's face contorted with rage and calcified.

"Respectfully, Master Poe: you don't know what the fuck you're talking about." Several younger Archivists looked at Thonis, who shrugged desperately. He had never heard Carroll swear before, much less glimpsed this acidic, savage anger. "Records show that Erebyssals wiped entire civilizations from the face of—"

"Records cobbled together from pseudoscience and storybook nonsense," Poe countered.

"I've seen them!" Carroll bellowed. Thonis and the other Archivists flinched, but Poe held his ground. Carroll continued in a rage: "When I was held under the Fae's thrall as a child, I saw a Greater Stranger. A self-Named Erebyssal. It *threshed* a host of Summer's strongest knights, at the zenith of their court's power. Their realm wilted around it like it was made of black iron. If this thing Names itself? This entire campus, this whole city will be..."

Carroll's breathing sputtered. He swallowed and clutched his chest. His eyes grew wide and vacant. *An acute panic attack. Or the world's best impression thereof.*

"Edrear, please," Carroll practically gasped. "You must believe me."

Poe nodded once, delicately.

"It seems I spoke in ignorance. My apologies. But I will not forsake our own people. If it comes down to it, we will fight the fae, and this 'writer' in sequence, self-Named or not. I called you here because you are our best chance at understanding this thing. Please tell us what we need to know. Quickly."

"Yes. Yes, of course." Carroll said, nodding, slowly regaining his composure. After a deep breath, he switched tracks and spoke as if he were delivering a lecture: "The first thing to understand is that these are utterly alien entities. Contrary to popular theories, I do not believe they are egregores—magic of faith and mentalism are no more effective than anything else.

Possibly less so. They are not fae, monstrum, or constructs. Human notions like biology, religion, and so forth will lead us astray. We cannot entrench ourselves in traditional modes of thinking.”

“How are we supposed to discern its name?” Stiles asked, unhelpfully.

Qess rolled their eyes and spoke up before Thonis could speak.

“Arithmancy. Numerology. Symbolic geometry. I know math is broad, but hear me out. This thing has no discernible interaction with magical energies, right? But it still must interact with the Resting Laws at some level in order to cross over to our plane. And math is our best framework for measuring and understanding the Resting Laws.”

Carroll nodded and pointed at Qess.

“Archivist Caldwell is correct,” He said. “Base, fundamental mathematics are a good place to search for repeating or thematic patterns.”

Stiles scoffed and said:

“Wouldn’t numbers require some other cipher to translate into a Name?”

*Kindly shut up, you wretched dolt.*

Carroll quelled a chuckle to a snicker, and gently cautioned:

“Don’t think of Names so literally. There will ultimately be a spoken component, yes, but that speech could express itself as completing a formula, drawing a symbol, or playing a song; all products of math.”

“So all we need is a mathematical focus for the rituals,” Qess said.

“Uh, where, exactly, are we going to find that? Everything on the index cards is written in unintelligible scripts... we can’t hope to come up with a translation in hours!”

“Stiles, be silent,” Poe said, sighing heavily.

A thought ignited in Thonis’ head.

“What about the tomes’ position in the collection? Where they first appeared?”

Poe’s eyes lit up and he barked at Stiles.

“Get me a map prism.”

Thonis was already drafting a list of the locations where the tomes had appeared. Stiles presented Poe with a small, crystalline disk. The diminutive Arch Magus snatched the disk, and channeled a small amount of his wyrd into it. A semi-transparent model of the Archive filled the air above the disk. Poe instructed Thonis to recite the locations, marking points on the map with red. There were six in all, forming no obvious pattern.

Poe studied it for a moment, then looked to Thonis and said:

“Senior Curator Stroud, if you would be so kind.”

Despite the circumstances, Thonis couldn’t completely suppress his smile. Fine divinatory contracts were his specialty. His ability to pinpoint locations and perform calculations allowed him to be the finest retriever in the library.

But Thonis’ blessings didn’t end there. Puzzles were his’ opus; the personal activity that passively restored his wyrd. The rate of recovery wasn’t enough to allow him to perform divinatory contracts indefinitely...*but I get more mileage than out that magic than any other amagia I have met.*

Thonis studied the glowing, mid-air map from every angle, constructing a replica in his mind. Then he closed his eyes, and gathered his wyrd around the ‘lexic’ animus in his right

license cuff. The incipient spirit that responded was charming: spritely, but unsure of itself, and bashfully requested Thonis hum a tune out loud in response for its services. Thonis obliged.

When the hum finished echoing, the contract snapped into place, flooding his wyrd with the animus' power. A network of information blossomed Thonis' mind. A seemingly endless index, capable of answering any question about the collection.

*Show me all the commonalities between these points.*

Another single point emerged on the glowing map, followed by pulsing glowing lines to the other nodes. Each line was equidistant, leading to a clearing on the third floor's western central landing.

*What does that point represent?* Thonis asked.

**An anchor.**

The animate spirit strained perilously. *It's running out of power much sooner than expected. Must be struggling to read the xenomantic phenomena.* Thonis used his wyrd to supplement the spirit's energies, soothe it, and preserve its loaned gifts for a few seconds longer.

*How do we dislodge it?*

The network went silent. For a full second. *What the devil? That's never happened bef—* Thonis was flung back across the stone floor, sliding to a stop at ten paces. His body buzzed with static, as if his entire nervous system was replaced with live wire in the space of a wink.

"Thonis!" Poe called.

It was maybe the third time his boss had ever addressed him by his first name. Thonis was distantly touched, through the levels of agony, confusion, and urgent elation.

"I think I know how to Name it," Thonis said, grinning, even as a rivulet of blood trickled from nose to his beard.

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The Archivist geared themselves for war. Poe divided his force into warbands with comparable levels of collective experience, and dictated their positions throughout the Archive. There was no telling where the Stranger would appear once it was named. Thonis' group consisted of Katrinya, Qess, Stiles, Emerick, Edgerton, Croft and Poe.

Thonis donned a thick coat of warded leather, supplemented with patches of alchemically treated titanium. He briefly considered bringing a war hammer, to better take advantage of his height and strength, but ultimately settled on his familiar paired daggers. He hated being slow, and felt it best to stick to his experiences.

As everyone grabbed their preferred armaments, Master Carroll provided them with all the information he knew about summoning, naming, and fighting Strangers:

"...Elemental magic is profoundly powerful against xenomancy, but it should be practiced at an... instinctual, intrinsic level. Somebody capable of elemental magic with raw sorcery would be ideal for performing auguries to ascertain its Name. Contract magic is generally too entrenched in preconceived notions to detect and effectively correct Erebyssal disturbances."

Thonis shot an eye at Katrinya and then Qess.

Both of them were accomplished pyromancers, capable of igniting and manipulating fire with raw sorcery. Most amagia required the contractually bound aid of anima to perform such feats, or in Thonis' case, a wand to use as a focus object. But Katrinya, a battle-hardened veteran from the Drakanov Archive could conjure balls of fire that erupted with titanic force. It was an impressive ability with tremendous combat utility, but a near-apocalyptic desperation measure in the Archives.

*Qess, on the other hand—*

Katrinya jerked her thumb to the side, directly at Qess's spikey mop of auburn hair.

"Their nickname is *literally* 'Firereader.' They should do it."

Thonis grinned. *True enough.*

Qess had the remarkable ability to generate waves of fire that would 'read' their surroundings, catching and burning their intended target, but leaving adjacent objects unscathed. All without anima or contracts. Thonis had never heard of somebody with a comparable talent. It was the stuff of storybooks.

Poe regarded Qess carefully and nodded.

"Yes. They should. Caldwell, will you lead the ritual?"

"Sir?" Qess squeaked, incredulous.

"Carroll just told you we need a skilled elemental. And I suspect we would benefit from a youthful perspective. Somebody unfettered by an excess of experience and tradition. Since Zictor is afflicted, and Stiles is a fool, their burden falls to you."

To his credit, Stiles sustained the insult with quiet dignity. Qess swallowed and then looked over to the Medithurges hovering around Zic's prone body. The sight caused Qess' resolve to surge so sharply that Thonis felt it in his wyrd.

"Yes, sir. I won't let you down."

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The march to the third-floor landing was solemn and quiet. When they arrived, Poe started barking orders at the host of Archivists, positioning people in a strategic circle around the center of the landing, which resembled a gallery amidst the sea of shelves. Displays showcased relics from all over the world. Blades, armor, ritual tools. If they had more time, it would be ideal to take down the displays. *God only knows what the Stranger can do with them.*

"I just burn the books and use a divinatory contract on the flames. Right?" Qess asked.

"That should be it," Thonis confirmed. "Obviously, be prepared to give it your all.

Divining the significance of this location depleted my animus quick. I think the xenomancy actively resists it."

Qess nodded.

"And there's no risk that destroying the books will harm the victims?"

Thonis frowned.

"There's always a risk, Qess. But I think the books have already done their thing. That's why I could read them without harm after they... enthralled Zic and the aspirant. But this is the best bid Carroll, Poe, and I could come up with."

Qess lowered their gaze to the pyre of magically silent books and drew a deep breath.

“Steel yourselves.” Poe commanded. “Kinetic buffers. Elemental wards. Reflex enhancements. Strength too, if you can spare the anima. Expect the worst and be equal to it.”

Dozens of contracts flared to life across the landing as the Archivists cast various boons upon themselves. Thonis quickly armored himself, then ejected the spent anima orbs from his license cuffs and restocked their slots with fresh ammunition for elemental spells.

After three minutes of prep, Poe nodded at Qess.

“Begin, Archivist Caldwell.”

Qess extended their hand to the books, and blasted them with a plume of flames that burned magenta and teal. There was no spectacular explosion, as there likely would have been with overtly magical texts. The crystal plated book cracked under Qess’ heat, the scent of burnt leather and glue filled the air. Then they began the divination contract.

They closed their eyes, and a second later, their eyelids erupted with a dazzling amber glow. Qess stared into the flames for several seconds, muttering arcane words of power to herself. Then the glow in their eyes flickered, and they flinched.

Thonis clenched his fists. *Come on, Qess. You can do this.*

The fire grew brighter, now a normal orange... but the flames were wrong. They hitched, like a poorly edited video, rather than waving or flickering. Qess drew a deep breath and threw their head back.

“Oh, vile intruder, destroyer of veils, I bind, summon, and brand thee with a True Name. Weaver of the Unheard, Typist of Whispers: Ertullix!”

The syllables of the last came unbidden, a product of the ritual, and the Archives’ voice, as much as Qess’. A circular gale tore outward from Qess, shattering the glass display cases and knocking volumes from their shelves. The wind whistled and faded to a whisper as it tore through the corridors. Then silence.

“Did it work?” Stiles asked.

Qess nodded their head and shrugged.

“I connected with something, but—”

Poe hushed the others with a single, harsh emanation. At first Thonis heard nothing. Then there was a faint mechanical clicking, like the tapping of a typewriter.

“Ready yourselves,” Poe commanded.

The clicking faded for several seconds, then returned, much nearer, and louder. What had been a single typewriter now sounded like a battalion of mad authors, fingers frantically mashing keys like torrential rainfall.

Then Ertullix emerged.

Spidery, spear-like legs of rusted-metal and naked, red sinew scrambled out from the westmost corridor of shelves. The thing was nearly as large as a car, but its long appendages made no audible noise, or they were drowned out by the deafening clicking that came from its core body—a mass of writhing maggot-white flesh, studded with metal protrusions.

*No. Not writhing. Moving.* The thing’s body was comprised of countless child-sized hands. And they typed on the protrusions constantly, punching them in such a frenzy that a human’s fingertips would be reduced to bloody nibs.

At the front of the creature, there was a human head, although everything above the nose was covered by rows of the rusted metal protrusions—*typewriter keys*. Its lipless mouth was stretched into manic rictus.

And the entire thing appeared magically inert. It had no life force whatsoever.

Poe was first to fire. He waved a hand and a fissure of frost snaked across the stone floor, coating the thing in a thick rime. Thonis had seen Poe use variations of that contract before. It was powerful enough to freeze an industrial golem's joints. Ertullix merely stiffened against the frost, then broke free of it, seemingly shrugging the spell off.

Emerick followed up with a bolt of electricity, and while the smell of burnt flesh filled the air, the creature continued forward, thrusting its needle like leg at Poe. The arch magus narrowly deflected the hit with his wyrd, but the force of the blow sent him sprawling. Then the spider creature whipped around, catching Emerick under the chin with another leg in a broad sweep. It raised both its front legs—it appeared to have twelve in total—preparing to plunge their tips into the Archivist.

Thonis bellowed and launched himself forward, parrying both legs with his knives. The force of the blow nearly dislocated both his shoulders, but he forced himself to press his attack, jabbing his dagger with wyrd-assisted strength into its key-covered forehead. The blade slid between the keys into the soft white flesh beneath.

If the thing had a brain in the traditional sense, Thonis undoubtedly punctured it.

It didn't seem to give one fresh, hot damn.

It swatted him to the side, knocking him into an adjacent bookshelf. Thonis repositioned himself mid-flight with sorcery, kicked off the shelf and flung himself on the thing's body with a reckless howl. He plunged both his blades into the thing's pallid flesh. Fingers squirmed against Thonis' body, scratching and pulling at his robes, attempting to gouge his eyes. He removed a dagger and plunged it in again. And again. A gout of black blood splattered him across the chest. The spurt instantly knocked Thonis clear from the thing. It felt as if Ertullix had slashed him with a giant razor.

Pain unlike anything Thonis had experienced wracked his body. *The blood must be acidic, or poisonous.* Yet his armor and orange robes remained undamaged. It was the mere presence of the liquid that seemed to burn him alive, its stench conjuring despair from the depths of his mind.

Croft layered binding after binding on the creature while Katrinya and Edgerton hit it with a volley electricity, frost, and kinetic bludgeons. Two of the thing's legs were mangled, should have been crippled, but it kept walking all the same. Its white flesh painted the collection black with arterial sprays of inky blood. But it was still standing. In fact, it seemed indifferent to the damage it sustained.

Qess rushed forward with a battle cry and blasted the thing with a billowing stream of flame. It turned around, still silent save for its clicking, and charged forward. Qess did the dumb, heroic thing, and redoubled their efforts, putting a titanic surge of will behind the wyrd fire. It didn't even slow the creature down. Ertullix reared back, then jabbed its two forelegs forward.

Thonis' mind raced. *Can't intercept the blow. No time.* He tried to yank Qess away with his wyrd, but the Stranger's black blood seemed to have leached the energy out of him. It was like trying to blow out a campfire when he was out of breath. *I can't do a goddamned—*

Stiles shoulder-checked Qess out of the way, simultaneously parrying one of the creature's outstretched legs with his blade. *You brilliant bloody fool!* Stiles ducked beneath the other attacking limbs, leaning into a slide that carried him beneath the creature. He shoved his sword directly upward into Ertullix's bulbous body. The thing reared back, preparing to smash the Novice Archivist.

Thonis had finally regenerated just enough power to reach out with his wyrd and desperately pulled Stiles back by the shoulders with telekinesis. The creature slammed into the ground a millisecond after Thonis pulled the Novice clear. Ertullix was still impossibly soundless, though Thonis felt the floor shudder under the impact and shower dust from the upper levels.

Another war party of Archivists arrived, and they mobbed the creature like a pack of orange wolves, striking with melee weapons and short-ranged elemental sorcery in a ruthless onslaught. Then the thing's mouth opened. The air around it seemed to turn simultaneously viscous and fuzzy. The full cohort of attacking amagia halted their attack, gripping their heads or sagging to the ground. Even thirty yards away, a dizzying sensation filled Thonis' head, followed by pain like a dozen hot coat-hangers shoved into his brain.

All of their defensive contracts had faded to nothing.

They were normal humans again, naked and vulnerable.

Thonis watched with horror as the thing speared Edgerton through his right shoulder and whipped his body across the room like a rag doll. *Don't die. Don't you dare die. You have a damn daughter!* But Thonis knew that was a punctured lung at best. Ertullix pinned Cruz to the floor by driving a spiked leg through her calf, smashed Bartholomew in the jaw with another limb, and splattered the other amagia with its caustic blood, as if it was aiming the streams for maximum coverage.

The silence that shrouded its movements was its most galling feature. Noiseless movements were almost impossible to read, and it was doubly shrouded by the constant, maddening clicking. But the real problem was feedback. The thing never cried out, or gave any active indication that it was hurting. Adapting to an opponent's condition was a crucial aspect of any fight, but especially in supernatural duels where certain avenues of offense could be completely null and void.

*We have no idea what's working. I can't tell if we have even dented it.*

The Stranger's head was consumed by a blast of blood red fire. Katrinya charged forward in her fireball's smoldering wake, bringing an enormous blade—a sort of broadsword ending in a wide, front-facing axe blade—to bear against the thing's legs. She hacked one appendage completely clear, but another leg flashed forward, slicing armor clean off her back. The blow sent her sliding back, and Thonis did his best to break her fall. There was a bloody gash running from her left flank to her right shoulder, but fortunately, it seemed shallow.

"Cyka blyat!" She spat.

The thing scrambled toward both of them, the constant clicks of typing echoing in their ears, at odds with the silence of its movements. Thonis' wyrd was spent. He was a powerful physical fighter, but his wyrd was well suited to illusions, divination, and other delicate magic. Elemental brute force was not his forte. Thonis and Katrinya tried to mutually shield each other.

*This is it.*



Then whistles and hissing air abruptly drowned out the maddening clicks. A torrential volley of arrows sailed above Katrinya and Thonis. The shafts pin-cushioned the creature, hitting it with enough repeated force to halt its approach and drive it onto its back legs.

Katrinya and Thonis looked over their shoulders to find a host of knights armored in faen alloys advancing from the corridors of books. Thonis' faun was first among them, carrying a viciously serrated lance. It spoke a word in elvish—*charge, I believe*—and they assaulted the Stranger.

It speared two fae knights straight away, causing their bodies to burst into brilliant, chromatic flame and hallucinogenic dust. Thonis felt no remorse and only faint gratitude. They would regenerate in the Faed, in time. All fae were semi-immortal, and there was no higher honor than temporarily falling in battle against a foe.

*We do not grow back, however. You should have been here from the start.*

The faen-cover fire allowed the Amagia to regroup in a circle, and they started another bombardment of spells. Through the din, Thonis began to hear scrapes and swooshes of displaced air coming from Ertullix's legs. The gulf of silence around the thing was shrinking. The spells were gradually hitting it harder. Best of all, the typing grew fainter, eventually stumbling into sporadic bursts.

"It's working!" Thonis bellowed. "Keep at it!"

"Hold the damn thing still!!" Poe shouted; his voice amplified by sorcery.

Thonis stepped up, and marshalled the last of his wyrd to try and constrain the thing's thrashing movements. The other archivists did the same, as the fae continued to throw themselves at it. As they collectively pinned the creature down, Arch Magus Poe completed a contract. A massive guillotine of blue light came crashing down on the monstrosity at the middle, slicing it in half. A smell like rot brined in battery acid filled the air.

Ertullix shrieked as it died, as if it were unleashing all the pent-up pain from its battle. The screeching continued, even as its severed halves curled into themselves and began to vibrate violently. The parts shivered until they became blurs. And the blurs faded out of existence entirely, as the scream finally fell silent.

After everyone caught their breath, Poe nodded at Qess with a tight-lipped smile.

"Adequately done, Firereader."

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Thonis checked his companions in his immediate surroundings, then rushed off to the nearest, most-obviously wounded archivist. He did his best to provide triage, but deferred to Katrinya in most cases. Poe barked orders for the whole thing to be cleaned up by noon on Venday, or some other utter nonsense. The damn Fae had the temerity to hang around until Thonis addressed them.

"We underestimated you," the Faun said, inclining its armored head.

"Indeed," Thonis said through clenched teeth. *My friends are wounded. My people nearly died because you and yours didn't deign to give us a damned hint or the assistance we needed.* "Now leave this place before there is further bloodshed."

Again, the fae inclined its head, then raised its flute to its lips and played its harsh exiting note before Thonis could object or cover his ears. When he opened his eyes, the host of fae were gone.

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Thonis quickly received word on his symphone that the victims had made a full, and instantaneous recovery, save for a few persistent eye twitches, and soreness from their stiff-limbed catatonia. As the war party made their way back to the east desk, adrenaline receding, the collection seemed to spring back to life. Books beckoned new readers again. The Archivists could hear shelves reorganizing themselves as they were wont to do.

Katrinya fell into step with Thonis and started to talk training and triage. Most of the other archivists shrugged off their gear when they reached the reference desk, and shuffled toward the entrance. Apparently, there was some sort of individual debrief to be done at the end of shift, but Thonis was in no hurry to speak with the suits. Katrinya took up a seat on the staircase leading to the watch tower, so she could look him in the eye, and they chatted until the conversation inevitably lulled. She broke the silence:

“Anyway. That was impressive. I respect a man who knows needle and thread.”

“I respect a woman who knows her way around giant swords.”

Katrinya’s smirk turned devilish, and she gave him a slow-rising leer:

“I certainly do.”

Thonis flushed slightly. *Intriguing.*

Katrinya started to lean forward and he abruptly remembered that their orange robes were among the least flattering garments a person could wear. He also realized, for the first time, that Katrinya was quite attractive. *In a Russian Valkyrie sort of way.* She continued to draw closer, something dangerous dancing behind her lips, on the tip of her tongue. *I have no idea what to do.*

Mercifully, her eyes flashed up to something over his shoulder. She clicked her tongue against her teeth in regret and hopped down from the stairs.

“Bad weather over there,” she muttered as she walked away.

Thonis turned slowly, to see Zic running over to Qess, who approached cross-armed, with a terse expression. Zic said something to the effect of “Don’t worry, I’m fine.” *And a rhetorical question from Qess. Oh! No. Now they’re beating him with their scabbard before he can answer. In the thigh. In the knee.* Thonis winced. Zic retreated. Qess relented.

After twenty seconds of talking, or rather, a litany of apologies and desperate justifications from Zic, Qess re-crossed their arms and somewhat bashfully asked something. Zic nodded. “Yeah, I’m fine.” Then Qess abruptly pecked Zic’s right cheek, and patted it after, as if to seal the gesture before walking away. Zic touched his cheek, looked after them, and a truly stupid smile blossomed on his lips.

Thonis ducked behind the massive desk before Zic could spot him. But he was a man about it. He did not swoon. And then squeal.

*Not an iota. There is no proof.*

When the coast was clear of potentially embarrassed parties, Thonis stood, straightened his collar and started walking back toward the collection’s side of the reference desk. At the

entrance to the collection, lo and fucking behold, Tatham Stiles was lounging like some damn tragic hero. Worst of all, he actually quite looked the part, with handsome features and rakish dark hair. It made the whole thing absolutely insufferable.

*Christ. Above. Almighty. Spare me this. Please.*

"I think I'm going to ask for reassignment," Stiles said, despondent. "I dunno what I'm going to tell my father. But I was...." He shook his head with gross melancholy.

"Quite useless," Thonis nodded and put his hand on his junior's shoulder. "Yes."

Stiles snorted a laugh and shrugged in acknowledgement.

"Categorically."

Thonis sighed heavily:

"But you were brave when it counted most. And more has been built upon less, if you have the will to do it." The Senior Curator let his wisdom linger a moment, before excusing himself to find Menette's book.

"Back to business as usual, huh?" Stiles mused.

*Yes. That's the job.* Thonis nearly gave him a dressing down, but caught himself.

"You've never seen anything like that before. None of us have, honestly. Take the rest of the day, and tomorrow as well. Think things over. Just let the old man know before the end of the week."

"Yeah, I think I'll..." Stiles' voice trailed off. Then he shook his head, swung down from the desk, and reattached his sword belt. "No. Actually, I'm coming with you. If you'll have me."

Thonis turned and arched an eyebrow. Stiles nodded at the cavernous collection.

"If I don't go back in there now, I don't think I'll ever work up the courage again."

Thonis drew his head back in surprise and grinned broadly.

"Very well, Tatham Stiles. Try to keep up."